

**BEYOND ECUMENISM.  
CONTEMPORARY SACRAL  
ARCHITECTURE AT THE BORDERS**

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## **Abstract**

Nearly half a century has passed since the Second Council of Vatican, which made the first attempts to establish an interdenominational congress widening Christian ecumenism's horizon. Non-Christian religions were invited to join a collegial worship in Assisi 1986, and later a conference in Fatima 2003 depicted the possibility of building an 'Interfaith Shrine' implemented as Holy Trinity in 2007. Meanwhile, several chapels, funerary places or meeting halls have been erected throughout the globe for the same purpose. Considering the architecture of the 'united faith', vast questions can be raised in order to determine its contemporary artificial means.

**Keywords:** Architecture, Contemporary, Sacral, Interfaith, Primordial

## **Introduction**

After decades of the theological intentions of the Holy See since the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, it has never been more important to focus on the possible ways of its tenets' architectural interpretation. We try to match vocabularies of pastoral and artificial practices, seeking the unity of spiritual tradition, efficiency and modern needs. Lack of collegiality would deny the words of Pope Paul VI on apostolic preaching (Paul VI 1975), hence missionaries of liturgy explanation play major role in evoking a programmatically more conscious sacral architecture (Pousse 2002). There is a need for not a code of liturgical design, but rather a co-reference, a co-existence of both confessional and architectural endeavours. The question is whether function will be able to define the appearance of a sacral building set up to house a totally new religious goal.

### **First steps toward the universal**

A number of articles have been published about a new kind of sacral architecture raised intensively during the late 90's, which the construction of the Swiss Kapelle der Weltreligionen (Chapel of World's Religions) of Guignard and Saner (1998) near Schattdorf well indicated. It is a consequence of the modern ecumenist mission launched after the Council's second session (1963) and the encyclical letter of the pope, emphasizing the words of Saint Paul to Hebrews: "The Divine Revelation was made in many ways and by many means" (Paul VI 1964). Ralph M. Wiltgen's account on the session leaves no doubts about that the issue of spreading ecumenism to all the world's religions took no distinguished chapters among the term's original proposals (Wiltgen 1967). The parenthesis idea was suggested by the 'Secretary of non-Christian Religions', for which the principal concept of Christian unity unexpectedly spread to the pursuit of dialogue with other religions, most spectacularly confirmed during an interdenominational worship in Assisi 1986, under Pope John Paul II. The same program was handed out in October 2003 to the chairmen of the Episcopal conference 'Present of Man, Future of God', held in Fatima, the Portuguese city of the collective apparition of our Lady dated back to 1917. According to the plans, an 'Interfaith Shrine' was going to be built for the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the miracle, which could have sheltered all denominations assembling to a common prayer. The interreligious concept was later reduced to an ecumenical pilgrim centre enveloped in a recognisably catholic iconography, called today as Santíssima Trindade (Holy Trinity) (2007), a grandiose, round-shaped plan from the Greek architect Alexandros Tombazis.

### **Interfaith churches**

The church sits on the shoulder of the downhill leading to the sanctuary of Our Lady of Fatima erected in 1957. The area matches the size of the court in front of St. Peters' of the Vatican. Its low cylindrical wall clad with white limestone does not break by a single corner. Lack of details makes it monumental, however, hiding behind the steep ramp, the building introduces itself via a visual illusion of being much smaller than it was geodetically measured (Katona and Vukoszávlyev 2008). The circular ground plan is interrupted by a pair of concrete beams driven through its sloping auditorium. These two strings make the structural axis of the plan, on which all other lintels lay. Between them, south sun-sheds beacon the ceremonial way to the altar podium. All the rest of the space is filled with diffuse north-light; hence there are both warm and cool light inside. Such is the binary meaning of the round shape (the passive

principal) with its diametrical axis (the active principal), which is an essential symbol easy to be recognised by thinkers come from any culture.



Figure 1 Holy Trinity of Alexandros Tombazis

Buildings designated to recollect worshippers may also be driven by the will to follow the biblical prophecy (Rev 11, 14, 21), although the difficulties of choosing the adequate architectural devices are underestimated. To express communion artificially, we need to work with a concentric or at least focal diagram. This is most easily done by a central ground plan addressing people's attention to an eye of the space. Spatial direction, however, is not unambiguously combined with the frames of a sacral building. Physical attire – like the matters and structures, the use of ornaments, tracery or elemental plasticity, and most eminently the prints of religious symbolism – roots in specific traditions, local conditions and intellectual abilities of a nation (Schuon 1948). A pantheon of various religious typologies would more easily become a complex of confusion than a key to deeper understanding.

Peace proved to be one of the principals of the papal letter to the hierarchy reopening the synod. World peace may not be achieved without inner balance, the calm of passions, which lead to the apprehension of the self and the 'other'. It seems evident that a building coming up to these expectations needs to embody stillness and sheer simplicity. Thereby given three of the most important characteristics (centrality, balance and laconism), we can examine built examples whether they use the same premises. We can raise the question if sacral universality leads to syncretism or rather to a primordial archetype (Katona 2009). What these new houses of reconciliation declare is the ascent of everyday rituals, allowing space for meditation and prayer, and the eschewal of clean-cut references to separate denominations; as it was clearly testified in

Axel Schultes and Charlotte Frank's Crematory in Berlin-Treptow (1999). Symbols venerated by miscellaneous congregations converge to the symbolism of the building itself. There are many coinciding particularities in cosmic symbology of different sacred architectures anyway – the cubic crystal of the traditional Indian and of the sanctuary of Solomon's Temple is just one example (Burckhardt 1990).

Spatial simplicity in liturgical design takes back in Christian world to Cistercian architecture, whose meaning today is filtered through layers of the modernist context; however, abstraction in itself does not have to do with sacral stereometry. The latter overtakes the importance of material functionalism, although does not contradict the practical viewport. The Swiss example mentioned before takes remarkably one of the most persistent forms that can be routed out in history of sacred architecture, namely the cube. On the northern side of St. Gotthard Pass, near the edge of the highway connecting the ultramontane Switzerland to the cisalpine Europe, the chapel shows up as a massive but modest solid hiding among trees. The highway cutting through the Alps and Uri canton can be considered as the aorta of European transportation and international connection, so was the pass an age before.

Clients found it necessary to offer spiritual peace to all the passengers seeking rest before setoff in the close neighbourhood (Guignard and Saner 1999). The highway chapel is an attempt to create a ritual space which can express unity of religions beyond ecumenism, which is, theoretically, sufficient to all confessional practice. This implies the necessary interior emptiness of the perfectly shaped edifice, initiated by a closed courtyard with a pool and a case for candles. The surrounding concrete walls are embossed with reliefs forming Christian rosaries and Hebrew tphilins. Blank walls of four times fifteen double windows, filled with coloured chips of glass, encompass the interior, which is oriented toward a gorgeous crystal in the centre. It is the 'fixation point', the prism that unites a diversity of coloured flinders made of the same transparent material. The inner space expands while the cladding remains rational gray and silent window-black.

The highlighted centre is also treated with distinguished care in Axel Schultes' Crematory. The building places actual liturgical spaces to the periphery of a central hall supported by headless columns thrusting the roof, where light can freely enter. Sidewalls and ceiling are disconnected by fissures of the apex corners. Light imbues delicately on engravings of the Saqqara-reminiscent concrete walls ended in small ponds of ashes. At the core of the column-forest there is a calm fountain mirroring an egg hung over it upside down. The image centred in the funeral 'temple' is a symbol of palingenesis common in traditional Greek, Hebrew or Hindu doctrines (Guénon 1973). In numerous aspects we can find similarities between the symbolic shelling of the egg and the crystal-stone seen formerly. Because of this entity's transcendent

message and the strong characteristics of its architectural language, the meeting hall appears to be the building's real *raison d'être*. Traditional view on life and death revives in leading mourners out of calamity into a joint rite of contemplation (Russell 2000).



Figure 2 Chapel of World's Religions by Guignard and Saner

Funeral edifices certainly give us more examples of the interfaith program. One of the formal features connecting them is archaic monumentalism, which is a synonym for the constellation of symbolic composition, minimal shaping, spatial clearance and rough or tactile materiality. Platonic perfection of forms, however, is not as crucial as before. Fürstenwald Cemetery (1996) was built near Chur, the Swiss city in Graubünden, by the collaboration of architects and landscape designers Dieter Kienast, Christian Vogt and others. This complex, drawn by a stone baffle running north to south over the Rhine valley, consists of a mortuary, a funeral chapel and a meditational pavilion at the furthest point. Inside the chapel there is a longitudinal liturgical space most peculiar to the Christian model, but as we get closer to the southern curtain-wall, we discern a variety of Leta Peer's pictographs of less-known religious signs backed upon the glass (Fernández-Galiano 2002). An interdenominational concept was worked out also by the Dutch studio Zeinstra van der Pol for Monuta Morgue (2001) in Apeldoorn (the Netherlands).

## Conclusions

All the seeds of the religious orientation introduced here share programmatic and formal characteristics, which make them probable to have been planted

from the same source. Is it an outcome of the architecture fulfilling unprecedented demands, or an inspiration found by digging down to the primordial, what could tell more about the power of this effort than the latest reinvention placing the Pyramid back to contemporary religious context? The pyramidal Palace of Peace and Reconciliation (2004-6) built in Astana (Kazakhstan) by Sir Norman Foster has to be mentioned. The second level of the three-storied monument serves as a convent hall for priors of all major denominations.

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